

WINDY CITY TIMES

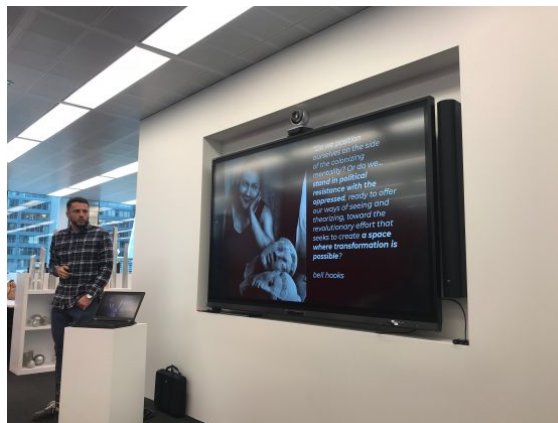
Deconstructing spaces to include LGBTQ, minority architects

by Ariel Parrella-Aureli

2018-10-29



Panel of Jennifer Brier, Cordelia M., Mary Patten, Max Smith, John Neff and Alex Fialho. Photo by Ariel Parrella-Aureli



R. Chris Daemmrich. Photo by Ariel Parrella-Aureli



Kathryn Anthony. Photo by Ariel Parrella-Aureli

Architecture is gaining diversity from women and minority professionals.

In 2016, 36 percent of newly licensed architects were women and 15 percent of new architects and 30 percent of new exam candidates identified as non-white, according to demographics from the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) also saw an increase in African-American and women members, according to its 2015 study, "Diversity in the Profession of Architecture."

The National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) encourages this diversity by promoting community engagement and professional development of its members. It hosted its 46th annual convention in Chicago Oct. 17-20, bringing hundreds of Black, Asian, Latino and LGBTQ architects together to network, share design innovation and deconstruct the industry to for broader inclusivity.

While some groups are still underrepresented, it is growing to encourage future architects that do not represent the heteronormative, white man perspective to be leaders in the industry. One way to inspire them is through education and awareness, which Kathryn Anthony has been doing for almost 33 years. Anthony, a distinguished professor with a Ph.D. at the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, created a seminar called "Gender and Race in Contemporary Architecture," which is one of the longest-running courses on diversity in architecture and is looked to as a national prototype from other architecture professionals. It highlights past Black and women architects, educates students on issues minority groups historically faced and how traditionally designed spaces—like public bathrooms—are discriminatory to them, particularly trans and women.

Anthony, who has written three books on design diversity and is published in over 100 publications, came to speak at the NOMA convention along with students currently taking the class to share its benefits, obstacles in creating it and where the discussion on race and gender is today.

"It's improved but we should still go a lot further; I wish we were further than we are," Anthony said,. However, she acknowledging strides by AIA, the Equity by Design movement and research from her 2001 book "Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Architecture Profession" as good progress.

Designing space for the LGBTQ community is best seen through bathrooms, which Anthony loves to study and takes her students to see different ones on campus. How they invoke comfort and privacy depending on who they are designed for is so obvious that people do not think twice about it, she said. But they are a necessity for some in the LGBTQ community, and Anthony wants the design community to be inclusive of all genders.

"These binary divisions cause a lot of problems for people," she said. "We have seen a lot of improvement on college campuses with gender-neutral bathrooms. The trans community has been very effective in voicing their concerns and getting change."

Deconstructing design spaces like bathrooms and learning about the gender and race divide in architecture has been illuminating to Anthony's students. Anirudhvaradan Kalayanaraman, a second-year graduate student from India, said the topic is scarcely talked about in architecture, which he thinks is disappointing.

"When we are in a profession that deals with shaping human lives and how people live their day-to-day; we need to take into consideration all factors—gender and race are two of the main factors," Kalayanaraman said. "When you slap a gender on a space, you put one gender before the other. That's the main cause of gender disparity in bathrooms."

His classmate Becca Vahldick, who is involved in the LGBTQ community, agreed and said both are now more empowered, more educated and more aware.

"Becoming educated on the topic opens a whole world of opportunities for people because once you know what people go through, you will be able to change it—you want to change it," Vahldick said.

She realized that the course has focused on many women designers but no LGBTQ architects, although Anthony said students have an option to independently study a designer of their choice for a later project.

The class started with one person and now has taught over 250 students, many from minority groups that have said the class' knowledge helped them succeed in their career. Having professors like Anthony in architecture school can shape the way one thinks about the profession and its historical players.

R. Chris Daemmrch, an architect in New Orleans who happens to be gay, started looking at ways to deconstruct and challenge design practice from the white supremacist imperialist patriarchy in American architecture after some college professors opened his eyes to gender disparities and racism in the field. He also presented at NOMA and discussed the oppression architecture spaces put on various minority groups and his involvement in intersectional architectural activism to combat racial and gender inequality.

"Most architectural activism is in spaces led by Black people and other people of color," Daemmrch said. "I have noticed that those spaces are more queer than white spaces—Black, queer people in particular—but I feel more comfortable as a white, queer person in this space because it's more open to these conversations."

He said he normally does not out himself at work or in presentations but he understands what it is like having a marginalized identity as a basis for oppression. He also understands his position of privilege as a gay white man in design.

"I try to emphasize that this work is being done by me and by lots of people who don't look like me," he said.

Daemmrch sees deconstructing oppressive design and changing the way architecture treats minorities and LGBTQ architects from the corporate side and not only activism. Perhaps the most visible LGBTQ architecture is one already mentioned: gender-neutral bathrooms.

"They are incredibly important," he said. "That's a place architects could be more [like] activists when it comes to supporting queer people."